

Positioning Research Triangle Park for Continued Prosperity

Corey Liles

Home to over 170 companies and 39,000 knowledge workers, the Research Triangle Park (RTP) is known globally as a center of ground-breaking innovation and discovery. But building a research cluster from scratch demanded careful collaboration and foresight from leaders in government, business, and academia. In the late 1950's, with a state economy that relied heavily on agriculture, tobacco, furniture, and textiles, North Carolina leaders saw the pressing need for new opportunities in innovation industries. The key ingredients were already present in the Triangle: cheap land, research conducted at nationally recognized universities, and an educated labor pool. RTP thus became an early national example of a planned science park. The future of RTP requires this same careful collaboration and planning to ensure its continued success in a changing market.

RTP is a unique community focused specifically on

non-residential development that is limited to research, development, and high technology manufacturing. As a planned effort run by the non-profit entity, the Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina (RTF), RTP has a unique location with its connection to three research universities—Duke University, North Carolina State University, and UNC-Chapel Hill. Thanks to strong leadership coordinated among the public and private sectors, RTP stands today as the largest science park in North America and one of the most significant employment centers in the state. Its creation produced ripple effects across the state economy, creating greater prosperity for North Carolinians. This legacy of success now serves as the cornerstone for the next major planning effort in RTP: envisioning a new Master Plan.

The Master Plan, an effort of RTF, comes in response to the new circumstances. For the last fifty years, RTP grew and thrived by recruiting large corporations who occupied separate research campuses; however, current market trends suggest a new model is needed for the Park. Trends in entrepreneurship create momentum for start-ups, university spin-offs, and other smaller ventures. Rather than buying land, these businesses tend to prefer leasing space in walkable, mixed-use environments. Greater concentration of activity encourages collaboration while providing on-site amenities to the next generation of knowledge workers. Unfortunately, RTP currently lacks these spaces and amenities—putting it at a disadvantage against the newest wave of research parks. Furthermore, the Park faces competition from established technology regions such as Boston and Silicon Valley, along with emerging clusters worldwide. Many other regions offer firms more incubator space, better access to venture capital, and, in the case of some international research parks, lower costs. The competition is intensifying, and so RTP must now work to remain cutting-edge.

The new RTP Master Plan promises to attract a broader range of companies while retaining and growing existing businesses. With these goals in mind, several main principles emerged in the planning process: clustered development that offers a variety of research facilities; vibrant, mixed-use research centers that foster innovation and promote social interaction; increased development capacity for established campuses; and more clearly defined roadway entrances into RTP. At the same time, there is a focus on sustainability, including the restoration of natural systems and attractive, shared open space.

So how will RTP accomplish the objectives outlined in the Master Plan? As the original landowner of RTP, the Research Triangle Foundation is able to exert some control over development through real estate transactions. Over time, the Foundation cultivated a strong set of companies that are invested “citizens” of the Park, each with a deeply rooted presence. These include large corporations like IBM, the U.S. EPA and other federal agencies, and scientific institutions such as the N.C. Biotechnology Center. With about 10% of the land remaining under its control, the

Foundation still has the opportunity to be strategic about what facilities they attract to the Park and who will build that space.

Another way the Foundation will work to achieve these objectives is through branding. For the first several decades, RTP stood alone in the hinterlands between Durham and Raleigh. But growth slowly extended to the Park's doorstep. Today, the surrounding office and industrial buildings 'blur the edges' of RTP, diluting the strength of a Park address. The Master Plan expands on prior efforts to define boundaries—taking signage, landscaping, and other aesthetics to the next level. The proposed mixed-use center and other signature destinations are intended to promote a strong sense of place. Having a community brand is valuable anywhere you go, but in RTP's case it makes an enormous difference in attracting new companies and maintaining existing ones.

For the Master Plan to succeed, it is crucial to remember that relationships and collaboration contributed to the original success of RTP. The Park's founders developed the vision of RTP's future in conjunction with leadership in government, academia, and business. Through this collaboration, they gained not just supporters, but advocates dedicated to making North Carolina a better, more dynamic place. A statewide network of contributors raised the initial capital for the Park in less than three months during the fall of 1958. The Foundation also enlisted university professors to make recruiting visits to research companies. People connected with people to make the RTP vision a reality. Later, in the 1970's, the Foundation sought to underscore RTP's relationship with the three flagship universities by establishing a 100-acre joint campus for scholarly collaboration.

These collaborations were not just institutional, but intellectual as well. Partnerships led to innovative ideas and practices in the development of RTP, such as the incorporation of green building design. This same intellectual collaboration will be important in developing the Master Plan, especially when brainstorming new and creative programming opportunities for cluster development and a mixed-use center. The Foundation also seeks to partner with companies by developing infrastructure and amenities that serve the companies that move into the Park. The effective integration of land use planning and economic development enables the Foundation to know its customer and to plan for their needs. This point is crucial when considering that the Master Plan encompasses not just urban form and design, but programming elements. Beyond cafes and hotels, RTP companies cite the need for more incubator space and better access to capital. The Foundation does not provide all of these amenities directly, but can instead leverage the strengths of RTP companies and tap into some of the groundwork that is already being laid. For example, universities are seeking out opportunities for campus extensions and on-site programs. RTP can respond to this need by attracting and partnering with organizations such as The Contemporary Science Center which hopes

to establish a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) high school in RTP. Partnering with carefully selected institutions will ensure the Master Plan's success by bringing in the right functions for the right space.

These are a few broad brushstrokes that hopefully give a sense of the history and future of Research Triangle Park. Several key lessons emerge from studying RTP's history. First and foremost, is the lesson that strong relationships can often surpass regulations in producing desirable outcomes. Second, land ownership can be an effective component of the planner's toolbox. Third, building public amenities should be driven by the goal of building a community brand. All of these lessons will be considered as implementation of the Master Plan gets underway. It is designed to be an evolving document that offers guidance for business strategy and financial planning, in addition to land use recommendations. The Research Triangle Foundation is charged with attracting new industries and jobs, not just to RTP but to North Carolina. This mission distinguishes it from a municipality or a typical developer, and the new Master Plan is unique as a result. But keeping that focus on the core mission, and outlining the steps needed to follow it, is a principle any planner can follow. In the end, this focus may offer the greatest opportunity to have an impact.

Corey Liles serves as Planner for the Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina, manager and developer of the Research Triangle Park. He provides technical input and other support for land-use and infrastructure projects in RTP, including the new Master Plan.